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THE HISTORY OF TERRORISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Terrorism and sub-state political violence have a long legacy in Southeast Asia that dates to the struggles of ethno-nationalist and religious groups fighting for minority self-determination during the Cold War. Since the late 1990s, however, the residual challenge posed by militant extremism has risen in reaction to both the force of modernization pursued by many Southeast Asian governments and the political influence of Islam—which has itself been further amplified by the contemporary force of jihadi radicalism.

In the southern Philippines, an ongoing Bangsamoro insurgency continues to disrupt stability, investment, and local development. In stark contrast to its original inception, it now has an explicitly religious bent. Further complicating matters in the country is an entrenched communist terrorist insurgency that is seeking the creation of a Maoist state through protracted people's war and which continues to draw sustenance from popular disillusionment born out of government corruption and the existence of sharp socio-economic inequalities.

In Indonesia, Islamic extremism has emerged as an increasingly salient threat since the demise of the Suharto regime in 1998. In particular, a dramatic reawakening of historical Muslim identity has combined with a more fluid domestic environment to dangerously exacerbate and radicalize popular sentiment across the archipelago. This has helped feed and foster a newer generation of jihadi militancy that is variously dedicated to the genesis of a fundamentalist order in Indonesia or a wider caliphate in Southeast Asia.

Finally, in southern Thailand, violence associated with Malay-Muslim separatism has been a recurrent problem since the late 1960s. The overall scale of unrest, however, has risen dramatically since 2004 to the point that the so-called “deep south” is now in the throes of what amounts to a full-scale ethno-religious insurgency.

This chapter examines the evolving scope and dynamic of terrorism in Southeast Asia, drawing on the undercurrents of unrest summarized previously. It delineates groups by country, profiling both historical and active terrorist groups.

Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines is an archipelagic state that consists of 7,107 islands scattered across 1,295,000 square kilometers of territory. The largest are Luzon in the north and Mindanao in the south. The country has a population of more than 110 million, the vast bulk of which (estimated at 81%) adhere to Catholicism, with Islam at 5%.²

Figure 9.1 Map of Southeast Asia.¹

Source: CIA, *The World Factbook 2020* (Langley: Central Intelligence Agency, 2020).

The Philippines has a turbulent history. The archipelago fell under Spanish colonial administration in the 16th century, which lasted until 1898, when it was ceded to the United States following the Spanish-American War. In 1935, the country became a self-governing commonwealth as a prelude to independence after a 10-year transitional period. This was interrupted by the outbreak of the Pacific War and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in 1942. American and Filipino forces fought together to regain control, which was achieved in 1945.

The Philippines finally achieved its full independence on July 4, 1946, when Manuel Roxas was sworn in as the first president of the new republic. Since then, the country has experienced 14 years of martial law (under Ferdinand Marcos), two mass “people power” movements that have removed elected leaders from office (one in 1986 and one in 2001), several coup attempts, and numerous corruption scandals. Persistent problems that continue to plague the country include poverty, social inequality, rural stagnation, and ethno-religious marginalization.³

Against this backdrop, the Philippines has confronted an extremely diverse mosaic of internal security challenges that have spanned the spectrum of Bangsamoro separatism, Islamist extremism, and communist-insurgent war. Much of the country’s internal violence has stemmed from Moro Muslim grievances in Mindanao, a region that has never viewed itself as part of an integrated Catholic Philippine state. Combined with economic neglect and poverty, the people on this southern island have long harbored a sense of oppression and victimization that has given rise to and sustained a range of rebel groups, including the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Abu Sayyaf Group, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters.⁴

Apart from militants in Mindanao, the Philippines faces an ongoing communist terrorist insurgency, the origins of which date back to the Huk rebellion of the late 1940s and early 1950s but the modern manifestation of which has been the campaign waged by the New People’s Army since 1968. Underscoring and feeding this particular internal security challenge, which Manila regards as its most serious, have been severe social inequalities (especially in the countryside), poor governance, economic stagnation, and the political opportunity afforded both by Philippine leader Ferdinand Marcos’ declaration of martial law and agreements allowing the United States to maintain military bases in the country.⁵

Moro National Liberation Front

The MNLF was initially the main vehicle for pursuing the Muslim Moro struggle in Mindanao and its surrounding islands in the southern Philippines. Nur Misauri, an ethnic Tausug and former university professor, established the group in 1972. The movement adopted an overtly nationalist ideological agenda that was aimed at achieving self-determination for the Bangsamoro people through armed struggle. Such an outcome was enshrined as an essential precondition for the implementation of Islamic institutions in a future independent republic. To this effect, the MNLF created a dedicated guerrilla wing, the Bangsa Moro Army, to directly confront the Filipino military.⁶

Benefiting from alleged training in Malaysia and drawing on weapons and money supplied by Islamic states in the Middle East (predominantly Libya), the group rapidly expanded. By the mid-1970s, it had grown into a sizeable rebel force of 30,000 fighters.⁷ The MNLF’s struggle lasted until 1996, when it signed a peace accord with President Fidel Ramos. The agreement led to the creation of a limited Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao that was to remain within the constitutional parameters of the Philippine state.

The 1996 deal ended the MNLF’s campaign of violence. Despite sporadic clashes against the security forces, the movement has largely adhered to the terms of the peace accord and is not designated as a terrorist entity by either the European Union or the United States. Nevertheless, its war with Manila, which

cost the lives of some 100,000 people, continues to have an enduring legacy in the Philippines and remains one of the bloodiest episodes in the country's history.⁸

Moro Islamic Liberation Front

The MILF is the largest and best-equipped Islamist militant group in Mindanao. It was officially established in 1984, largely in reaction to the MNLF's more ethno-centric character. Under the hardline leadership of Hashim Salamat, it pursued an explicitly Islamist agenda aimed at creating an independent state based on *Sharia* (Islamic law) in all areas of the southern Philippines where Muslims have traditionally been the majority. The group was highly critical of MNLF leader Misuari's 1996 deal with Manila, charging that he was a traitor who had deviated from the correct Islamic line in both war and peace.⁹

Salamat died in 2003 and was succeeded by Al Haj Murad Ebrahim. Under the pragmatic leadership of the new chairman, the goal of outright independence was gradually moderated in growing recognition that a guarantee of comprehensive autonomy rather than full statehood was the most realistic concession that could be extracted from Manila. To this end, Murad committed to a mutual cessation of hostilities agreement in 2003 and has since participated in Malaysian-sponsored talks aimed at resolving a broad array of concerns about a future self-governing Moro homeland.¹⁰ Most of these issues have been resolved, and despite periodic clashes with Filipino forces,¹¹ the group has settled for the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which formally came into being following two plebiscites held in 2019.¹²

Organizationally, MILF is split between an executive and a dedicated armed wing known as the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces. The armed wing can call upon some 40,000 fighters, 30% of which will be decommissioned as part of the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.¹³

Most of MILF's violence has taken the form of classic guerrilla warfare against the Philippine military rather than indiscriminate attacks against civilians. That said, they are widely suspected of having a special operations group that has carried out deniable urban bombings and random shootings when it believes such actions will have value in refocusing national and regional attention on the Bangsamoro struggle.¹⁴

MILF has also been linked to the activities of Jemaah Islamiyya (JI), which between 1998 and 2007 was the most dangerous cross-border terrorist entity in Southeast Asia. For much of JI's earlier inception, the movement enjoyed free access to the MILF's main headquarters, Camp Abu Bakar, in Maguindanao, where it was allowed to establish an autonomous militant outpost known as Wakalah Hudaibiyah. After the central base fell to the Philippine military in 2000, MILF reportedly assisted JI in setting up a new facility deeper inside the province that remained operational until 2003.¹⁵

Despite these early links with JI, MILF has, for the most part, not been intimately involved in violent jihadi extremism. The group formally renounced the use of terrorism in 2003 and the following year effectively cut all connections with JI—realizing that in the context of peace talks with Manila, any perceived association with the Indonesian network would be counterproductive. There is no indication that MILF has been influenced by the ideology of the Islamic State. MILF leader Murad has vociferously denounced the “savagery and barbarism” of the Islamic State and has also pledged a ready willingness to actively work with the government of the Philippines—in the context of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao—to prevent the Islamic State's ideology from taking hold in Mindanao.¹⁶

Abu Sayyaf Group

The Abu Sayyaf Group was founded on the island of Basilan in 1991 under the leadership of Abdurajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Afghan *mujahidin* during the 1980s. The group's stated objectives are the eradication of all Christian influence in the southern Philippines and the creation of an Islamic state of

Mindanao.¹⁷ From the outset, however, this local agenda was tied to transnational extremist designs—notably the regional and global supremacy of Islam through the force of arms—mostly rhetorically but also on occasion substantively.

Toward that end, the group actively sought to establish ties with international extremist groups. During its early years, when it operated as a cohesive and explicitly religious jihadi outfit, Abu Sayyaf was linked to several transnational terrorist plots. One of the most infamous was Oplan Bojinka, which was hatched in 1995 by Ramzi Yousef, a “freelance” Islamist militant and the convicted mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

The multi-pronged plot was to have included the assassinations of the Pope and President Bill Clinton while they visited the Philippines in 1996, coordinated attacks against the U.S. Embassies in Manila and Bangkok, and the mid-air detonation of commercial aircraft flying trans-Pacific routes from the U.S. western seaboard. Authorities foiled the plot only after volatile explosives ignited a fire in an apartment Yousef rented in Manila, forcing him to flee to Pakistan, where he was subsequently detained and extradited to the United States.¹⁸

From the late 1990s onwards, however, the group steadily deteriorated into a fractured, largely criminalized entity due to the loss of several senior commanders and the influx of a new generation of cadres motivated more by money than Islamist zeal. Compounding its weakness was a sustained Filipino military offensive that proved decisive in blunting Abu Sayyaf’s operational capabilities. This effort received important backing from the United States under Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, which was instituted in 2002 and was primarily aimed at ensuring the group was not allowed to emerge as an active beachhead for al-Qaida-style extremism in Southeast Asia.

Today, the group numbers in the hundreds, split between roving kidnap-for-ransom bands operating across the small islands of the Sulu Archipelago. The largest and most active factions are based on Basilan and Sulu. Even though in its current configuration, the Abu Sayyaf Group operates mostly as a criminal entity, there are indications that the group is attempting to redefine itself as a more integrated and credible Islamist militant force. Perhaps the clearest sign of this—and in direct contrast to the stance of the MILF—have been moves to identify more closely with the international Islamist cause, particularly as personified by the Islamic State’s struggle in Iraq and Syria.

In 2014, the now-deceased Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon uploaded a video on YouTube in which he read an Arabic statement that pledged full “loyalty and obedience in adversity and comfort” to the Islamic State.¹⁹ He was consequently declared the Islamic State’s leader, or *amir*, in Southeast Asia and in May 2017 was at the forefront of the dramatic seizure of Marawi City, which dragged on for five months, led to the deaths of 1,200 people and the displacement of a further 350,000 and, ultimately, set the stage for the establishment of a new Islamic State province in East Asia.²⁰

Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, also known as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Movement, is a splinter faction of MILF that emerged under the leadership of Ameril Umbra Kato, a Middle Eastern-trained scholar and the former leader of MILF’s 105th Command. He accused MILF of departing from the original goals of the Bangsamoro struggle and selling out the Moro Islamic cause by entering into negotiations for Mindanao’s autonomy rather than full independence.²¹ Kato died from pneumonia in April 2015 after which command passed to the more radical Ismael Abu Bakar, also known as “Bonmgos.”²²

Its strength is estimated to be less than 1,000 fighters, although these cadres have increasingly been divided between two main factions: one led by Sheikh Muhedeen Animbang and one under the charge of Ismael Abu Bakar. The former is stronger both in terms of numbers and in its capacity to steal weapons as well as manufacture its own. As with the Abu Sayyaf Group, neither represents a threat beyond the conflict

zones of the southern Philippines, where they mostly target police and army outposts. These confrontations typically escalate in the run-up to the holy month of Ramadan and frequently involve attacks against civilian communities.²³

Despite being relatively small and disaggregated, the group carries important implications for both the MILF peace process and general stability in Mindanao and its surrounding islands. The group has shown itself both willing and capable of engaging Philippine security forces, targeting both military and police outposts. In line with its original *raison d'être*, the stated objective of these attacks is to sabotage the peace process as part of the long-term goal of achieving Bangsamoro independence.²⁴

In common with Abu Sayyaf, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters pledged support to the Islamic State in a YouTube video aired on August 13, 2014. Although not as strong as Abu Sayyaf leader Hapilon's *baya*—in the sense of articulating full obedience to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the recording established that a mutually beneficial alliance had been forged.²⁵

The New People's Army

The New People's Army acts as the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines, which José María Sison launched in 1968. Its stated aim is to replace the current political and economic order in the Philippines with a socialist system through a strategy of protracted people's war. To accomplish this objective, the movement employs all tactical means at its disposal, including insurgent warfare, urban sabotage, mass mobilization, political lobbying, and international solidarity work with other like-minded left-wing groups.²⁶

At the height of its strength, the communist guerrilla force could call on 28,000 fighters who were organized into 87 combat fronts that were mainly scattered across the Visayas, eastern Mindanao, the Compostela and Surigao valleys, Davao Oriental, Davao Central, Davao Norte, Misamis, and Zamboanga del Norte.²⁷ Through the Communist Party of the Philippines' legitimate arm, the National Democratic Front, the New People's Army/Communist Party of the Philippines also penetrated key sectoral organizations that were then leveraged to support the "people's war." Notable in this regard were youth groups, labor unions, churches, university student bodies, and even political parties (mainly by buying off corrupt congressional representatives).²⁸

The basic strategy employed by the Philippine government to defeat the movement is to combine "hard" coercive offensives with "soft" incentive programs. The New People's Army/Communist Party of the Philippines is weaker today than at any time in the past. By 2016, the organization had fewer than 5,000 cadres at its disposal, suffered from the capture of key operational leaders, and has been driven from many towns and hamlets, retaining a presence in a mere 1,190 barangays (the smallest municipal government unit), which equates to only 5% of the country's total.²⁹

Reflecting its degraded capacity, only a small amount of the group's activity currently takes the form of classical guerrilla warfare, with the bulk of its actions comprising sporadic and opportunist attacks on Philippine security forces, government officials, and infrastructure, as well as kidnap and extortion schemes.³⁰

Summary

The persistence of terrorist and insurgent groups in the Philippines reflects the inability of the state to exert its writ over Mindanao and its surrounding islands, weak governance, social inequalities, and an uneven distribution of economic wealth. These interrelated conditions have generated a sense of alienation and resentment in certain segments of the country's local population (especially evident in the south) and contributed to gaps in governance that have acted as a magnet for competing poles of power of both Bangsamoro Muslim and communist varieties.³¹

Of the various principal groups that have operated in the country, however, Manila has always regarded the New People's Army/Communist Party of the Philippines as its primary internal security threat. Military, police, and government officials have consistently prioritized the battle against the communist insurgency on account of its motivational goals (the overthrow of the existing political architecture), geographical spread (nationwide), and infiltration of key state institutions.

By contrast, the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters have historically been small entities, and neither has demonstrated the ability to operate beyond purely local theaters. Although the MILF has presented a greater challenge, under the leadership of Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, the group has exhibited a steadily growing willingness to negotiate with the government and settle its conflict on terms considerably short of its original goal.

The Philippine experience with terrorism demonstrates how ungoverned spaces can quickly translate into hubs of militant activity that can take years to root out. Even if these zones of militancy never develop into threats that fundamentally erode the underlying fabric of the state, they can still manifest in a manner that requires the allocation of scarce resources.

Indonesia

Indonesia straddles the equator, occupies a strategic location astride major sea lanes that connect the Indian and Pacific oceans, and shares land borders with Timor-Leste, Malaysia, and Papua New Guinea. It is the world's largest archipelagic state, consisting of 13,466 islands (of which 922 are permanently inhabited). The country has a total population of 258 million, the majority of which (approximately 87%) are Muslim. Christians and Roman Catholics form the next largest denominations. Ethnically, Indonesia is predominantly Javanese (approximately 40%), although there is also a relatively large Sundanese community (15.5%).³²

The Dutch colonized Indonesia in the early 17th century, remaining in control until 1942, when the Japanese invaded the country and commenced a three-and-a-half-year period of occupation. Following the end of the Pacific War in 1945, Indonesia declared its independence, but it took four years of fighting, negotiations, and mediation by the United Nations before the Netherlands finally agreed to a transfer of sovereignty in 1949.³³ Darul Islam, a theologically driven movement that was committed to the creation of a fully fledged Islamic state, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new secular-oriented post-colonial government and during the next decade launched a series of rebellions that for a time challenged the writ of the central administration in Java.³⁴

In 1957, President Sukarno declared martial law and instituted his concept of "guided democracy"—in effect authoritarian rule—to both cripple Darul Islam and forge a wholly unified political system based on the traditional hierarchical organization of Indonesian villages. After an abortive communist coup in 1965, Sukarno was eased from power, and Suharto assumed leadership in what effectively amounted to a military putsch. Dubbing his government the "New Order," Suharto's increasingly dictatorial regime took hold in the country and lasted until 1998, when a popular uprising toppled Suharto and paved the way for elections the next year.³⁵

Although hailed as a landmark in Indonesia's history, the sudden transition from rigid and uncompromising rule to an open political democracy removed the lid on simmering ethno-religious tensions that had previously been contained. Combined with poverty, inflation, unemployment, and the re-awakening of dormant Islamist identity, a highly fluid, if not freewheeling, domestic threat environment materialized that hardened communal divisions and radicalized popular sentiment across the archipelago.

These developments fueled a growing fundamentalist undercurrent that has provided fertile ground for an assortment of radical groupings with militant tendencies.³⁶ Three in particular have attracted attention: JI, which is now largely defunct as a militant movement, and two that are currently active, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT).³⁷

Jemaah Islamiyya

JI is an Indonesia-based jihadi organization with links to al-Qaida. The movement was established in January 1993 under the combined leadership of Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Bashir. It defined its objectives in both local and regional terms. The immediate goal was to fully realize Darul Islam's original agenda of instituting *Sharia* in Indonesia, which was then to be enshrined as part of a wider vision that sought the creation of a pan-Southeast Asian caliphate embracing Brunei, Malaysia, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines.

JI has been described as al-Qaida's operational wing in Southeast Asia. While the group is known to have established loose ties with Usama bin Ladin's movement in the years immediately before 9/11 and continued to accept funding and technical expertise after the 9/11 attacks, it never subsumed itself under al-Qaida. By contrast, the group evolved as a distinct entity, developing an organizational and operational character that was specifically designed to further its own regional Islamist agenda.³⁸

At its height in 1999–2000, estimates placed JI's hard-core membership at around 2,000 activists supplemented by a wider support pool of 5,000 passive sympathizers.³⁹ These cadres were organized into four regional divisions (*mantiqis*) that were defined along both geographic and functional lines.⁴⁰ Between 2002 and 2005, JI was recognized as the most dangerous terrorist organization in Southeast Asia. Unlike its early militant activity, when the group mostly worked with other Islamist groups in carrying out attacks against Christian communal targets in Maluku and Sulawesi, this period was characterized by an operational agenda that was exclusively aimed at causing mass civilian casualties.

Suicide attacks marked the hallmark of this violence. Some of the more lethal attacks include the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2003 assault on the JW Marriott in Jakarta, and the 2004 attack against the Australian Embassy.⁴¹ All of these operations demonstrated considerable skill in terms of bomb construction and pre-attack planning and surveillance and were mostly justified under the twin umbrella of fighting the "far enemy" (the United States and its Western allies) while fostering the supremacy of Islam across Southeast Asia.⁴²

Although Indonesia based and regionally networked, JI also enjoyed a strong presence in the southern Philippines. The group both benefited from open access to militant camps run by MILF and established robust operational and logistical ties with the movement. For at least five years, Mindanao acted as a strategic rear-base for JI where attacks were planned, munitions procured, and cell members trained.⁴³

The threat emanating from JI—regionally and to the southern Philippines—started to diminish following the second Bali bombings in 2005. Three main factors accounted for this demise.

First, Indonesia's highly effective counterterrorism efforts successfully eliminated some of the group's most lethal and proficient commanders. *Densus 88* (Detachment 88), an elite national police rapid response team established with U.S. assistance in 2003, was at the forefront of these neutralizations, which proved decisive in breaking and disrupting jihadi cells across the country.

Second, many were uncomfortable with the large number of Muslims killed in JI's attacks—which was particularly true of the Marriott Hotel and Australian Embassy attacks in Jakarta. Ensuing Islamic criticism not only deprived the movement of vital grassroots support, but it also triggered an internal split between so-called pro-bombing hardliners and traditionalists who viewed the use of such indiscriminate tactics as counterproductive.

Third, the MILF peace process, which placed considerable pressure on the MILF to ensure they had no outward association with any outside extremist organizations, deprived JI of what had hitherto been a highly useful external safe haven.

By 2008–2009, JI had essentially disappeared as an effective militant entity in its own right. The final death knell of the group came when its founding leader, Abu Bakar Bashir, defected and established a separate group, JAT. Although the group remains intact and continues to espouse the full institution of *Sharia* in

Indonesia, it has continually stressed that this objective will now be pursued through *dawa* (preaching and religious outreach) rather than violence.⁴⁴

Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid

Bashir founded JAT in the city of Solo in July 2008. The group's basic ideology is articulated in a booklet entitled *Aqidah & Manhaj Kami* (Our Faith and Method) and essentially draws upon the historical Darul Islam aspiration of creating a hardline caliphate in Indonesia. All members take an oath pledging an unbending commitment to the enduring struggle against *musrik* (defenders of evil), apostates, and other perceived enemies of Islam, including followers of secularism, pluralism, liberalism, communism, socialism, and democracy.⁴⁵ Bashir established the organization as an alternative to JI,⁴⁶ from which he had increasingly become estranged on account of the large number of Muslims killed in its attacks, and which by 2006 had in any case largely ceased to act as an effective entity in its own right.

JAT is a hierarchical, vertically integrated movement. Below its ruling council is an administrative office that oversees five departments: finance, morality enforcement, religious outreach and media, education, and a secretariat. The group also maintains a network of branch offices that are divided into provinces, districts, and local cells.⁴⁷

The group can call upon hundreds of supporters and members. Tactics focus on bombings, assassinations, armed assaults, and rocket strikes. In addition to these traditional terrorist methods, JAT also makes extensive use of the internet and social media—both for recruitment and general communication and propaganda purposes.⁴⁸

Although formed in 2008, JAT only came to the attention of Indonesian authorities as a potential domestic security threat following a raid on a suspected terrorist training camp in the northwestern province of Aceh in February 2010. Although police found the facility vacant, they uncovered scores of weapons, bomb-making equipment, and other logistics that could be leveraged for militant purposes. Subsequent investigations tied this materiel to JAT, and three months later, a trio of senior commanders were charged with directly financing the camp. Although Bashir was not one of those originally detained, he was apprehended that August. In June 2011, Bashir received a 15-year jail term for inciting terrorism (after which control of the group passed to Mochammad Achwan).⁴⁹

Despite this loss in leadership, JAT continues to actively recruit and conduct attacks. Its main targets have included Indonesian governmental and security personnel and local civilians; Western non-governmental organizations; Australian and American aid workers and contractors; and soft, civilian-centric venues such as churches.⁵⁰

Several prominent members of the movement have also sworn allegiance to the Islamic State, including Bashir. Bashir proclaimed that it was obligatory for all members of JAT to both respect and obey his oath, declaring that anyone who refused to do so would be expelled from the group. This was an explicit attempt to bind the organization as a whole to the ideological and operational precepts of the Islamic State. Although some members rebuffed Bashir's call for allegiance to al-Baghdadi, many did not, arguably reflecting the continued influence that JI's former spiritual leader retains among radical Indonesian Islamists.⁵¹

East Indonesian Mujahidin/Holy Warriors

The East Indonesian Mujahidin/Holy Warriors is the most active terrorist group currently operational in Indonesia. Abu Wardah (also known as Santoso, or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi al-Indonesi), a former field commander in JAT, established the group in 2010. The group appears to act as an umbrella movement for militants based in the simmering conflict zones of Poso, Palu, and Bima.⁵²

The group has been portrayed as representing a new generation of jihadis in Indonesia that has been able to attract a level of grassroots support that JI failed to secure. Whereas the latter movement predominantly appealed to radicals who resonated with the al-Qaida emphasis on attacking the United States and its regional allies, the East Indonesian Mujahidin leader Santoso introduced a specific indigenous dimension to his group's cause, both ideologically and operationally.⁵³ The target set shifted from the United States to a more discrete focus on the central government's security apparatus (particularly the police), and the priority switched from forming a regional caliphate to championing the Islamic struggle against the secular-oriented administration in Jakarta.

Despite an intense crackdown on its activities that has seen its numerical strength cut in half, as well as the loss of Santoso, who was shot and killed in July 2016, the group continues to threaten domestic stability in Indonesia, carrying out repeated strikes on law enforcement personnel and facilities in Poso. According to intelligence officials, the group retains a high potential to perpetrate acts of terrorism and is now actively seeking to supplement its ranks by recruiting fighters from the international jihadi network, including Uighurs associated with the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement in Xinjiang, China.⁵⁴ The group has also allegedly sought to recruit individuals proficient in information technology who have reportedly been instrumental in urging Indonesians to wage a domestic war via visual propaganda disseminated over the internet.⁵⁵

Although primarily domestically oriented, the East Indonesian Mujahidin has pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The pledge may have been aimed at regional jihadis who were fighting in Iraq and Syria under the banner of the Khatiba Nusantara Lid Daulah Islamiyya, a special Malay-speaking unit of roughly 100 cadres, in the hopes that they will join the group's struggle upon returning to Southeast Asia.

Summary

The Indonesian internal threat environment improved considerably with the demise of JI. Nevertheless, the archipelago continues to confront an array of terrorist-related challenges that draw sustenance from radical Islamist sentiment that remains an integral component of the archipelago's domestic political landscape. Of particular importance is the ongoing legacy of Darul Islam, the wellspring of jihadi militancy in Indonesia that has yet to be fully expunged. Indicative of this predisposition to extremist beliefs has been indigenous support for the Islamic State, which more than any other Southeast Asian state has retained theological prominence at the grassroots level.

The future driving force and center of gravity for religious fanaticism in Indonesia will be contingent on a range of historic, political, and economic factors, some of which may well be beyond central government control (such as the outbreak of the civil war in Syria). Despite a general improvement in the country's overall terrorist risk profile, a latent potential for radicalism persists, which under the right circumstances could trigger a return to the type of chronic instability that characterized the immediate post-Suharto era.⁵⁶

One major concern centers on Indonesians who have volunteered to fight with the Islamic State in the Middle East. Between 300 and 500 nationals are thought to have joined the Islamic State, where they operated alongside Malays and Uighurs in a dedicated unit known as Khatiba Nusantara.⁵⁷ With the group's territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria in 2019, it is likely that some of these experienced, battle-hardened veterans will look to return home.

Such a development could have dangerous ramifications. Within Indonesia, they could breathe new life into a weakened East Indonesian Mujahidin and, by drawing on the tactics used in Syria and Iraq, spearhead attacks on Shia Muslims to incite sectarian hatred and violence. Regionally, they could work to rekindle transnational Islamic extremism by conducting cross-border strikes in the same manner as did JI—the group responsible for the worst terrorist atrocities to have ever been perpetrated in Southeast Asia.⁵⁸

Southern Thailand

The Kingdom of Thailand lies in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia bordering Burma (Myanmar), Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Known as Siam until 1939, it is the only Southeast Asian state never to have been colonized by a European power. Thailand has a landmass that covers 513,120 square kilometers of territory and enjoys important maritime outlets to the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. It has a total population of 68 million, 90% of whom practice Theravada Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians make up the remaining 10%. Ethnically, the country is almost exclusively Thai (97%).⁵⁹

A unified Thai kingdom has been in existence since the mid-14th century. It was not until 1932, however, that a constitutional monarchy replaced absolute rule, a transition that was ushered in on the back of a bloodless coup instigated by a small group of middle-ranking officials. The Japanese briefly invaded the country in 1941, and it fought against the Allies during the Pacific War but later became a U.S. treaty ally after sending troops to assist American forces in Korea. It similarly supported Washington's campaign in Vietnam, and in 2003, its status was elevated to that of a major non-NATO ally.⁶⁰ Thailand has since enjoyed close defense relations with the United States, although these have been periodically disrupted by coups—first in 2006 and then in 2014.

Militant activity in Thailand centers on the violent campaign for independence in the “deep south” provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani. Three interrelated factors have traditionally framed separatist sentiment in this particular region: a belief in the historical greatness of the ancient Kingdom of Pattani, an ethnic orientation with the Malay race, and a religious credo based on Islam.

During the 1930s, these core “ingredients” were woven together and used to advance a doctrine of self-defense that emphasized the right and duty to resist any form of persecution that placed communal survival in jeopardy. The specific stimulus for this development was the central government's assimilationist and modernization program that was aimed at eliminating “backward” Islamic customs and dialects, enforcing uniformity in language and social behavior, and phasing out the local institution of *Sharia*. These moves were undertaken in accordance with the so-called “Thai way” that has since delineated three main pillars for defining state identity: *chat* (nation), *sasana* (religion, in effect Buddhism), and *Kasat* (monarchy).

It is against this background that ethno-religious resistance in Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani has taken seed and evolved. Initially, these zones of dissidence were characterized by intermittent attacks that did not represent a genuine challenge to local security. Over the years, however, the situation in the three provinces has steadily deteriorated to the extent that the so-called “deep south” is now beset by what amounts to almost daily violence and internecine communal conflict.

Despite this, the terrorist insurgency does not compare with the jihadi campaigns in the Philippines and Indonesia in the sense that the militant focus has always remained highly localized and parochial in nature. While unrest has been a feature of southern Thailand for more than 50 years, it is possible to single out two distinct phases of violence: 1960–1998 and 2004 to the present.

Historical groups

Between 1960 and 1998, around 60 extremist movements operated across the Malay-Muslim provinces of Thailand's deep south, many of which benefited from a relative safe haven in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan. Collectively, these groups have come to be known as the “old guard,” and although each exhibited a different ideological and operational outlook, they all shared a common desire to carve out an independent Muslim state with Pattani as the center.

Violent action in pursuit of this objective typically fell into a standard pattern of low-intensity conflict and terrorism oriented around arson, ambushes, kidnappings, assassinations, extortion, sabotage, and bomb attacks. The overall aim was to present Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat as provinces that remained beyond

the sovereign writ of Bangkok; to undermine the security of ethnic Thais and Buddhists living in the region; and to place additional pressure on Bangkok to accede to the political demands of Malay-Muslim separatism.⁶¹

In August 1997, the scale of unrest spiked sharply after a number of militant groups forged a tactical alliance to refocus national and regional attention on the “southern question.” The groups undertook a coordinated campaign of bombings, shootings, and incendiary assaults that resulted in nine deaths, several dozen injuries, and considerable economic damage. At the time, the jointly orchestrated strikes, which were codenamed “Falling Leaves,” marked the most serious upsurge of Malay-Muslim separatist action since the early 1980s.⁶²

The coordinated campaign of attacks proved to be highly instrumental in heightening the overall visibility of the Muslim cause in southern Thailand. The operation, however, also heightened regional pressure on Malaysia to step up surveillance and monitoring of its northern border, with Bangkok arguing that Falling Leaves could neither have been planned nor executed without the benefit of a secure militant safe haven in Malaysia’s Kelantan State.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad responded, marking a significant shift in his government’s hands-off approach to what it had traditionally referred to as a purely domestic Thai problem. Malaysia carried out a series of raids along the northern Malaysian border that both deprived the primary old guard militant groups of an important source of external sanctuary and resulted in the detention of several prominent separatist leaders and mid-level commanders. These setbacks proved definitive in disrupting and hemorrhaging their internal operational structures. By 1998, the old guard separatist movement in southern Thailand had been essentially crippled.⁶³

Active groups

Unlike the earlier phase of the southern Thai conflict, there does not appear to be a centralized organizational nucleus of defined groupings behind the current bout of terrorist and insurgent activity. Attacks are the work of an amalgam of militants consisting of a newer generation of Islamists operating under the banner of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi; co-opted criminal elements; and a random collection of disaffected youths, unemployed farmers, laborers, and tradespeople.⁶⁴

Estimates of the number of people actively engaged in violent attacks vary greatly, from 5,000–6,000 to as many as 20,000–30,000—although the consensus suggests that the figure remains at the lower end. Thai officials believe the militant base is loosely organized around urban-based cells, each numbering between three and four cadres who are then grouped together to form independent teams of up to 18 operatives that function at the *tambol* (sub-district) level.⁶⁵

Armed actions are reportedly carried out by dedicated military wings known as *Runda Kumpulan Kecil* (small patrol groups), the members of which are between 16 and 24 years old, religiously pious, and trained in a range of skills including unarmed combat, bombmaking, weapons handling, and sharpshooting. A range of munitions is available to these squads, most of which seem to be locally made, stolen from the security forces, or procured from the stocks of old guard militant groups.⁶⁶

The ostensible objective of the current manifestation of the insurgency continues to emphasize the creation of an independent Malay-Muslim state, although there is a higher emphasis on the religious aspect of the end goal. Beyond this basic objective, the “new guard” does not seem to be guided by any overarching master plan other than fostering animosity between Muslims and Buddhists and generally making the southern border regions ungovernable.⁶⁷

Despite lacking clear strategic direction, rebels fighting in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat have taken their campaign of violence to a level of sophistication and ruthlessness not seen in the past. Between January 2004 and the end of 2015, incidents occurred on an almost weekly basis in the three provinces,

leaving more than 6,500 dead.⁶⁸ For a population that numbers only 1.8 million, these figures represent a considerable toll.

Besides this higher intensity, the sophistication of the insurgents has increased. Larger bombs are routinely deployed and detonated using an array of delayed and remote-controlled triggering mechanisms. In addition, attacks have become increasingly integrated. Typically embracing explosions, arson, assassinations, and random shootings, these assaults have been deliberately engineered to maximize overall impact.⁶⁹

An explicit jihadi undertone has also characterized the current bout of instability in the south, which was not apparent in the past. Reflective of this have been frequent attacks against establishments associated with secular decadence (such as bars and discotheques); the distribution of leaflets warning locals of reprisals if they do not adopt traditional religious dress and respect the Friday holiday; and the increased targeting of monks and other Buddhist civilians, often through highly brutal means such as immolations and decapitations.⁷⁰

The growing religious nature of the Malay-Muslim struggle has generated fears of it metastasizing into a more serious terror campaign that is exacerbated by operational and ideological links with international extremist networks such as the Islamic State and al-Qaida. As of 2020, however, there was no indication that this had occurred.

Summary

The scale, scope, and intensity of Malay-Muslim militancy have increased significantly since 2004. Bombings, shootings, and arson occur on an almost daily basis, and the number of people caught in the middle of this unrest has risen to unprecedented levels. While there does not appear to be a clearly defined strategy behind these attacks, militants have demonstrated that they are capable of conducting large-scale attacks on a relatively consistent basis.⁷¹

Despite the seriousness of the insurgency, there is no evidence to suggest that the Islamic State or other outside jihadi extremists have been able to hijack or otherwise co-opt the conflict. The terrorist insurgency remains localized, and even though a more Islamist orientation has been evident, it is not apparent that this has altered, much less superseded, underlying ethno-religious militant imperatives. This distinguishes the southern Thai insurgency from Indonesia's experiences with JI and the Philippines with the Abu Sayyaf Group.

In many ways, the failure of outside jihadis to hijack the southern Thai insurgency is not surprising. An overriding sense of self-identity characterizes the Malay-Muslim border provinces, which suggests the existence of an in-built barrier to external penetration. In contrast, in Indonesia and the Philippines, it is the religious component of militant extremism that is dominant in terms of self-identity. While there is an Islamist component in southern Thailand, it is ethno-nationalism that takes precedence; thus, externally based jihadi groups face a more difficult challenge in terms of proselytism and indoctrination.

Just as importantly, the types of radical Sunni teachings that have been sourced to jihadi strongholds in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya are at odds with the Shafi-based socio-religious orientation of Thailand's Muslim minority. For this community, the prime concern is restoring the historic glory of the Pattani Kingdom, not on ensuring the transnational supremacy of puritanical Islam.⁷²

Conclusion

The outlook in Southeast Asia has improved considerably from the years immediately following 9/11, when there was a genuine concern that the region could morph into a new beachhead for transnational terrorism.

In the southern Philippines, MILF has settled its political differences with Manila, acceding to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2019, and has vowed to act as a bulwark against

spreading Islamic State influence in the wider Mindanao basin. The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Abu Sayyaf Group are small, and despite swearing allegiance to the Islamic State, they do not have the capacity to operate beyond purely local theaters in Mindanao. The once-powerful communist New People's Army has been significantly degraded to the point that the movement is weaker today than at any time in the past.

In southern Thailand, although the tempo of the terrorist insurgency remains high, there has been no noticeable sign that outside jihadis have been able to hijack the local struggle for independence and co-opt it for other cross-border Islamist purposes.

Nevertheless, risks remain. Indonesia remains a particular cause for concern. Not only has the country emerged as the prime focal point for recent Islamic State-inspired extremism, but it could yet revert to a regional hub for cross-border jihadi extremism if volunteer fighters start returning home from Iraq and Syria.

On a wider level, it is also important to note that in many ways, Southeast Asia offers an ideal theater for terrorists, both logistically and operationally. Poor governance, weak states, corruption, porous borders, a relatively sophisticated communication and transport infrastructure, and an abundance of small arms all help to create fertile ground for militant non-state entities to clandestinely rest, train, move, plan, and conduct attacks. As long as this physically enabling environment exists, Southeast Asia will remain vulnerable to outbursts of extremist violence, especially when such a setting serves to aid and abet pre-existing domestic conflicts.⁷³

Reflective of this reality, the United States has and continues to work closely with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand—the three states that have historically been the main sites of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Support has primarily been channeled to boost inter- and intra-agency cooperation (especially in terms of intelligence fusion); promote accountability and professionalism in police, naval, and military forces; strengthen the rule of law; and heighten land and maritime border security.

These initiatives fall under the wider U.S. global partner nation capacity-building program that since 2019 has been managed by the U.S. Department of Defense's Institute for Security Governance. Assistance is aimed at consolidating national and regional contexts that are hostile to violent extremism and will continue to act as a central component of Washington's unilateral and bilateral engagement efforts in Southeast Asia.

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